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Who belongs to the "historic nation"? Fictive ethnicity and (il)liberal uses of religious heritage

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ABSTRACT

Scholars in various academic disciplines have pointed out how national religious heritage is increasingly appropriated by the far right, to construct a false binary between secular Christian European states on the one hand, and Islam on the other. This article contributes to this literature by examining how these political developments, often deemed "illiberal", are enabled by "liberal" uses of religious heritage. Using the lens of what Étienne Balibar calls "fictive ethnicity", the article examines how both liberal and illiberal uses of religious heritage in Western Europe construct a historic nation to which only dominant groups can lay claim, which contributes to the symbolic and material marginalisation of minorities. This has repercussions for analyses of socio-political exclusion and for liberal nationalist theory: addressing contemporary inequalities requires not only limiting explicitly exclusionary forms of nationalism, but also actively unsettling the widespread ontology of homogeneity underpinning national fictive ethnicities.

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Introduction

In Western Europe, religious belief and church attendance have declined over the past decades. At the same time, cultural identification with religion as source of heritage, history and belonging has remained stable or even increased (Balkenhol, Van den Hemel, and Stengs 2020; Beekers 2021; Davie 2006; Laniel 2016). The status of religious heritage, however, is often exclusively reserved for Christianity as the dominant tradition in Western Europe (Astor and Mayrl 2020; Beaman 2021; Lauwers 2022). Moreover, religious heritage has gained particular political salience in the context of protecting national culture against "the perceived threat posed by

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ethnoreligious "Others"" (Astor and Mayrl 2020, 216). This has raised concerns among scholars in various academic disciplines, who examine how religious heritage has been appropriated by the far right to construe a false binary between secular Christian European states on the one hand, and Islam on the other (Brubaker 2017; Duyvendak, Kešić, and Stacey 2022; Koch 2024; Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016; Strømmen and Schmiedel 2020; Van den Hemel 2018).

In this article, I argue that focusing on these political developments, which are often deemed "illiberal", is important, but should not detract attention from the fact that many of the problems identified also manifest in so-called "liberal" forms of nationalism. In fact, in the current political climate, liberal and illiberal discourses of religious heritage reinforce each other (cf. Mondon and Winter 2020).[1] I will show how both discourses sustain what Étienne Balibar (1991c) has called a "fictive ethnicity". This refers to the construction of a national group that is assumed to be pre-political. Those belonging to the nation are "represented in the past or in the future *as if* they formed a natural community, possessing of itself an identity of origins, culture and interests which transcends individuals and social conditions" (Balibar 1991c, 96). As Balibar emphasises, this "ethnicisation" is intrinsically connected to various forms of structural exclusion. In this article, I argue that the ethnicised discourse of religious heritage in contemporary Western Europe privileges historically dominant religious[2] and cultural groups, and contributes to the symbolic and material subordination of minorities. Addressing such hierarchies requires moving beyond the liberal-illiberal binary. Instead, I contend, it is necessary to question the ontology of nationhood that underpins current discourses of religious heritage.

In the first part of the article, I focus on Balibar's (1991c) description of the process of producing a "fictive ethnicity", which he considers central to nationalism. It involves the constant re-affirmation of a particular ontology of the nation as homogeneous community with a common destiny, linked to a particular territory and stable through time (cf. Sealey 2020). For Balibar, this ontology of nationhood is intrinsically linked to racism. In the second part, I use this lens of fictive ethnicity to analyse the current discourse on religious heritage in Western Europe.[3] Here, the assumption of a pre-political and homogenised "historic nation" with a religio-cultural heritage that needs to be protected privileges historically hegemonic groups. Moreover, the discourse of religious heritage implies that those who are not part of the "historic nation" do not truly belong, contributing to various forms of racism and religious discrimination. Although this is most visible in forms of identitarianism that are considered "illiberal", the same understanding of the nation is present in "liberal" discourses on religious heritage. In the final section, I discuss how this presents a challenge for thinkers in liberal nationalist theory who have responded to recent political trends by

advocating more stringent limits on what kind of national identification can legitimately be endorsed by liberal democratic states. I argue that such limits are necessary, but they are unlikely to be sufficient. If state policy is to be useful for countering malign understandings of national culture, it will have to actively address the ontology of homogeneity that underpins a fictive ethnicity.

Balibar's fictive ethnicity

Although other thinkers have also emphasised the socially constructed nature of the nation (most famously, Anderson (2006)), the insights of French philosopher Étienne Balibar are particularly instructive for the purposes of this article. Balibar examines how the rise of the nation-state is accompanied by certain ontological assumptions about nationhood. The nation as political community is seen as an "invariant substance" with a stable past, handed down over centuries, on a reasonably stable territory (Balibar 1991c, 86). Moreover, such a nation is ascribed a destiny in the present and future. Although they were only recently formed, and their characteristics have always changed over time, nation-states present themselves as eternal (Balibar 1991c, 88). Crucially, they presuppose the existence of a people that makes up this eternal core: a "natural community, possessing of itself an identity of origins, culture and interests which transcends individuals and social conditions" (Balibar 1991c, 96).[4] In other words, nation-states entail the presumption of what is commonly understood as "ethnic unity" (Balibar 1991c, 96). However, no nation-state actually possesses a given ethnic basis (Balibar 1991c, 93). This means nationalism requires the creation and perpetual curation of what Balibar calls a *fictive ethnicity*, to ascribe to the nation "the most natural of origins" and create a myth of homogeneity (Balibar 1991c, 96). The universalistic background assumption to this is that each individual belongs to one (and only one) ethnic identity – and each ethnic identity (potentially) corresponds to a nation (Balibar 1991c, 96).

In producing such an ethnicity, Balibar argues that nation-states have historically followed two main avenues: language and race. Both provide the means for establishing a "national character" (Balibar 1991c, 96). In the production of a national community, the two avenues are intertwined and complementary: whereas language can easily be learned, race distinctions are assumed to entail a more permanent difference, ensuring a more durable fictive ethnicity (Balibar 1991c, 98). As Balibar (1991c, 104) points out, "the production of ethnicity is also the racialization of language and the verbalization of race". We see this clearly for example when learning the "national" language is only a requirement for certain immigrant groups, or when "foreign" accents function as a marker of ascribed racial background (e.g. Linke 2003).[5] Yet, Balibar emphasises, in different political contexts, the

emphasis might tend more towards race or towards language. Racism is not present to the same extent in all forms of nationalism. However, it is always "a necessary tendency in their constitution" (Balibar 1991b, 48). In short, although nationalism and racism cannot be reduced to each other, for Balibar, racism is a "*supplement internal to nationalism*" (Balibar 1991b, 54).

For an analysis of fictive ethnicisation and religious heritage, Balibar's observations about racism are especially relevant. He takes care to emphasise that "all kinds of somatic or psychological features, both visible and invisible, may lend themselves to creating the fiction of a racial identity and therefore to representing natural and hereditary differences between social groups" (Balibar 1991c, 99). Cultural differences, he points out, can function like "natural" racial differences, "locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin" (Balibar 1991a, 22). In fact, as Anya Topolski (2020a, 271) explains, at the inception of the nation-state, religion was racialised to justify who belonged and who did not.[6] The principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*, institutionalised at the Peace of Westphalia (1648), created sovereign nation-states by justifying their endeavours to enforce religious homogeneity within their territory. In this process, different Christian denominations were seen as competing "religions",[7] but non-Christians "were most often viewed as heathens and barbarians, uncivilized and lesser beings" (Topolski 2018, 63).[8] In other words, religion was naturalised and connected to unequal status as human beings, where some non-Christian groups were even considered non-human (Topolski 2018, 2020a). Although religion is often associated with internal dispositions and beliefs, and race with – biologically interpreted – external characteristics and descent (Meer and Modood 2009), this shows how religion can be racialised and stand in for the category of race (Lentin 2008; Topolski 2018; Vial 2016).

With the consolidation of nation-states in later centuries, religion, often in a racialised form, remained a large part of the "fictive ethnicities" underpinning ideas of European nationhood. This is particularly visible in the nineteenth century, when debates about European national identities were intertwined with the so-called "Jewish Question", addressing Jews as alien group that formed a "nation within the nation" (Farris 2014, 296). Today, we see strong resonances of this in what we might call the "Muslim Question", where Muslims "are criticized for allegedly behaving as a separate body within Western nations" (Farris 2014, 296; see also Amir-Moazami 2022; Bracke and Hernández Aguilar 2022). Religion, then, has often played a central role in the production of nations' fictive ethnicity.

There are similarities between Balibar's analytic framework of fictive ethnicity and studies of the "logic of nativism", which also emphasise the role played by religion (for example, Duyvendak, Kešić, and Stacey 2022). However, Balibar more explicitly emphasises the ontological assumptions

of nationhood and community behind such a logic and shows that these assumptions are not only present in explicitly nativist versions of nationalism, but in state-endorsed nationalism in general. In the next section, I will build on these insights to show how the ontology of fictive ethnicity is present in both contemporary "liberal" and "illiberal" deployments of national religious heritage in Western Europe. This is an obstacle to achieving an inclusive political community because, as Balibar explains, although there is variation in how the fictive ethnicity sustaining national imaginaries is accompanied by racism and other forms of structural exclusion,[9] it is always a necessary tendency in their constitution.

Curating secular Christian national culture as fictive ethnicity

Although it takes a different form in different contexts, all Western European states support a form of national culture. In recent debates, a lot of attention has focused on politicians invoking a Christian or "Judeo-Christian" national identity (Brubaker 2017; De Waal 2020; Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016). However, the discourse on national culture is not only rhetorical or symbolic but also material. It includes state support for a canon of national culture represented in museums and school curricula, planning regulations designed to preserve the historic national character of neighbourhoods, provisions for national holidays, and citizenship exams and integration requirements. The current discussion on national culture in relation to religion primarily focuses on whether and how the religious heritage of "historic nations" should be awarded certain privileges to ensure their continued existence. I will first analyse how this discourse produces historic nations as fictive ethnicity to which only some citizens belong. Then, I will turn to the repercussions for minorities, who are construed as a potential threat to such historic nations. I will include both liberal and illiberal references to religious heritage. Following Mondon and Winter (2017, 2158), I distinguish these concepts based on how they are perceived in mainstream discourse. "Illiberal" here refers to an explicit violation of central principles of liberal democracy, such as constitutional rights and rule of law. "Liberal", by contrast, refers to a proclaimed commitment to such principles, particularly equal treatment and freedom of religion (Mondon and Winter 2017, 2158). In accordance with these principles, liberal uses of religious heritage cannot ban any religion or impose religious doctrines onto citizens. They can also not be defined in terms of race or descent. I will show that, despite such liberal provisions, fictive ethnicity is (re)produced in both liberal and illiberal uses of religious heritage.[10] Liberal uses often explicitly profile themselves in opposition to illiberal uses and are much less socially contested. Their role in producing and normalising a fictive ethnicity is therefore particularly powerful and – from the perspective of the ideal of equality – particularly problematic.

Who belongs to the "historic nation"?

Deciding who is part of national religious heritage in Western European nations is not "simply" a matter of historical excavation. As Stuart Hall (2004, 26) argues, the social memory of heritage "highlights and foregrounds, imposes beginnings, middles and ends on the random and contingent. But equally, it foreshortens, silences, disavows, forgets and elides many episodes which – from another perspective – could be the start of a different narrative". However, in contemporary discourses on religious heritage, the contingency of such choices (and the power relations embedded in them) is rendered invisible. In contemporary Western Europe, the traditions that are considered part of the "historic nation" are primarily limited to Christianity and secularity – at times taken together, which Jansen and Meer (2020) refer to as the "Christo-secular" imagination. French national identity, for example, heavily relies on a national culture of *laïcité*. Here, national public spaces are deemed inherently secular, understood as requiring the absence of religion (Van der Tol and Gorski 2022). Against this background, French legislation insists on excluding religious dress or symbols from the public sphere, for example in the ban on wearing religious garment for pupils and teachers in schools, and personnel working for the state or under contract with the state (Jansen 2013; Kiwan 2023; Laborde 2008). At the same time, prominent French politicians, including presidents Sarkozy and Macron, regularly refer to France's Christian foundations and values. Moreover, despite the rule that religious traditions "cannot be regularly displayed on buildings owned by public authorities" (Thebault 2017, 399), exceptions have been granted for Christian nativity scenes. This double affiliation between secularity and Christianity is even stronger in the national culture of states with "moderate" regimes of political secularism (Sealy and Modood 2022). For example, in the United Kingdom, the monarch is also the Supreme Governor of the Church of England (Modood 2019, 183), and Denmark has a national church (Vinding 2019).

There does not seem to be a tension between secularity and Christianity in dominant national imaginaries. In fact, there is a widespread assumption that the two have a close relationship: Christianity is either seen as a uniquely "Enlightened" religion, particularly compatible with secularism, or secularism is seen as the culmination of a Christian worldview (Hurd 2008). Christianity, or at least the Christianity considered part of national culture, is seen as sufficiently *secularised* to be compatible with a secular state. Marian Burchardt (2020, 196) explains how such (presupposed) secularisation is a crucial part of religious heritage: "religion has to be secularized in order to be resacralized because only in secularized form can it become the source of new [national] collective identifications" (see also Balkenhol, Van den Hemel, and Stengs (2020)). This entails that Christian religious heritage in Western Europe

often does not refer to religious beliefs, but primarily to what is considered "secular", "traditional" or "cultural". For example, when the prime minister of Bavaria, Markus Söder, announced in 2016 that Christian crosses will be displayed in all official buildings, this was not announced as means to promote Christian faith. Rather, the crucifix would function as "fundamental symbol of [the] Bavarian identity and way of life" (Beaman 2021, 96). Similarly, the minaret ban in Switzerland, the outcome of a public referendum in 2009, was defended in terms of the cultural protection of a public landscape dominated by Christian buildings and symbols (Green 2010). This is part of a broader pattern where Christian values, holidays, architecture, art and dietary requirements are often perceived as "secular", rather than "religious" (Astor and Mayrl 2020; Lauwers 2022; Oliphant 2021).[11]

This double emphasis on the secular and the Christian relies on a binary understanding between "secular" and "religious" that is far from self-evident (cf. Asad 2003). The way the boundary between these two categories is drawn is itself influenced by presuppositions about who already belongs to the "historic nation". Whereas majoritarian Christian practices can be construed as secular and cultural, the practices of minority groups are generally understood in terms of religion, at odds with secular norms. Mayanthi Fernando (2014) gives the example of the French context, where schools are organised around Catholic holy days and many school cafeterias serve fish on Fridays. However, "when Muslim French request the same kind of accommodations […] they are told that France is a secular country where proper citizenship requires separating religion from public life" (Fernando 2014, 11). This suggest that the status of "cultural religion" is only reserved for Christianity. As Gülay Türkmen (2024) explains, it wrongly implies that Muslim identity refers only to a religious identity, not a cultural identity. Moreover, maintaining such double standards forecloses the possibility that minorities could make a claim to become part of national religious heritage. As Lori Beaman (2021, 99) argues, it is only religions that have "traditionally been majority religions" that can refashion themselves as "culture, heritage and history".

The main distinguishing factor for the status of "religious heritage", then, is whether a certain religion has been historically *dominant*, not whether it has been historically *present* or even *influential* (as, for example, Judaism and Islam have been). Although Islam has a long history in certain European regions, and Muslim communities have been present in Western Europe following colonialism and "guest worker" programs, Islam is generally not seen as part of European national cultures.[12] Despite occasional references to a "Judeo-Christian" tradition, the contribution of Judaism to European cultures also tends to remain unrecognised. The identity of Judeo-Christianity usually only includes those Jewish elements and values that are subsumed under Christianity (Moyaert 2016). The first part of the Judeo-Christian signifier,

then, is often merely symbolic (Topolski 2020b). Moreover, an uncritical reference to Judeo-Christianity erases the history of antisemitism in the past and present in Western Europe, while simultaneously constructing an opposition between Islam and Europe (Beaman 2003; Topolski 2016).

Understanding religious heritage in terms of an assumed homogeneity of historic nations erases the violence involved in securing and protecting the hegemonic position of Christianity (Anidjar 2003; Nirenberg 2013). It also sustains the idea that we can speak of one unified majority culture, which obscures the history of cultural mixing as well as tensions within Christianity and between Christianity and secularity. As I will elaborate below, the assumption that European nations have a homogeneous religious past feeds into ethnicised ideas that changes to national culture only come from outside Europe, via so-called "immigrant religions". For now, however, it is important to emphasise that the understanding of "national culture" rooted in a homogenised image of the historic nation not only implies a distorted picture of the *past*. It also prescribes a homogenising understanding of national culture in the *present* and *future*. Public controversies about religion in national culture often revolve around protection against change.

As Ernst van den Hemel (2017, 17) explains, there is a pervasive narrative where "culture and religion are perceived as the 'roots' of majority culture. If one cuts the roots, does not cherish them, the plant will wither away and die". This narrative is visible, for example, where proposals to remove nativity scenes from city councils have been met with widespread resistance in various Belgian and French municipalities (Beaman 2021; Thebault 2017). The main argument invoked here is that removing the nativity scene means doing away with the "roots of our culture", as "the nativity is part of […] [national] heritage, beyond beliefs and sensibilities" (Beaman 2021, 106). We see similar ideas in the Dutch and Belgian debates on "Black Pete" (*Zwarte Piet*). The secularised Christian celebration of Sinterklaas (St. Nicholas) has been criticised for its racist stereotyping of black people, which led to widespread societal resistance in the name of protecting national culture. Responses varied from defending the celebrations as "innocent", to more explicitly racist nativist replies that those criticising the Black Pete practice had no place in these countries (Duyvendak, Kešić, and Stacey 2022; Lepianka and Hiah 2023). The shared assumption here is that the celebration is part of a pre-existing "historic nation", and it is important to protect it for the future.

At times, controversies have been created in the absence of pressure to change a certain cultural practice. For example, in the so-called "Easter Egg Controversies" in the Netherlands and the UK, certain businesses have been criticised for insufficiently featuring the Christian aspects of Easter celebrations, even though they had not made any recent changes. As Van den Hemel (2017, 3) explains, such companies are accused of "kowtowing to

political correctness and [… .] bending a knee to Islam". Although these arguments have primarily been popular among the far right, mainstream political figures have also expressed their concern. In the Netherlands, Halbe Zijlstra, MP for the liberal party VVD, called the sale of chocolate eggs without showcasing Easter an "attack on our way of life" (cited in Van den Hemel (2017, 3)). Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte expressed his agreement, and also emphasised the importance of Dutch people wishing each other "merry Christmas" rather than "happy holidays" (Van den Hemel 2017), emphasising that to be Dutch means to stand in a Christian tradition.

These controversies reaffirm the static and homogenised nature of how "national culture" is understood and defended. Moreover, they show how, as Beaman argues, it is difficult to call into question ""our" culture or heritage", because "the challenger is immediately positioned on the margins, as an outsider who does not belong and is not one of "us" because culture is taken to be self- evident" (Beaman 2021, 97). In this way, discourses of national culture homogenise the idea of "the nation's" past, and advocate protecting this homogenised understanding of a historic nation into the future. What becomes clear in these debates is that national culture is often perceived as being under threat from those groups defined as "other", intersecting with Islamophobia and other forms of racism and religious bigotry. To this I now turn.

The nation under threat: religious heritage and marginalisation of minorities

Curating national culture based on the understanding that it is a homogeneous and pre-political *fait accompli*, something to be conserved rather than the latest stage in a dynamic process, is directly related to a policing of its boundaries. As Mariëtta van der Tol and Philip Gorski (2022, 507) argue, the idea that "the nation needs to be preserved" means that the "national space must not be 'polluted'" too much. Discourses about national heritage therefore imply a classification of who does and does not belong, with both symbolic and material consequences. As mentioned above, primarily Christian practices are seen as part of national religious heritage. Christian symbols such as crucifixes and nativity scenes, or celebrations of Christian holidays, have been defended as "secular", "cultural", "artistic" or "festive" in nature, rather than primarily "religious" (Thebault 2017). Conversely, the protection of a static and essentialised understanding of secular Christian heritage is invoked as justification for marginalising, excluding or dehumanising minority groups. Such *Leitkulturism* is most explicitly found in far right discourses that announce the "invasion" of non-Christian migrants, often conflated with Islam and Muslims, and implicitly or explicitly invoke white nationalism (Brubaker 2017; Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016; Strømmen

and Schmiedel 2020). For example, the leader of the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), Geert Wilders, insists that tolerance and the separation of Church and State were the result of the "West's Christian Heritage", while arguing that atheists and Christians should unite to defend it against Islam (Van den Hemel 2018, 249). Similarly, German far right nationalist movement PEGIDA argues for the defence of a secular "christlich-jüdisches Abendland" ("Judeo-Christian West"), and French Rassemblement National (former Front National) considers *laïcité* to be central to Christian culture, under attack from Islam (Van den Hemel 2018; see also Morieson 2021).

In these examples, it is the fixation on a homogeneous and predefined projection of a national culture that amplifies and enables fears of the "majority culture" being replaced. We find this idea explicitly in what is called the "Great Replacement Theory", a conspiracy theory that depicts Europe as being invaded by Muslim immigrants out to destroy European culture, causing the "majority" to be "replaced" in their "own" countries (Bracke and Hernández Aguilar 2024; Koch 2024). Here, the fictive ethnicity produced in nationalist narratives is clearly racialised: the "native" population must remain white and Christo-secular. The recent turn to religion and religious heritage in identitarianism should be understood in the wider context of the "religionisation" of minorities, justifying structural inequalities by referring to religious difference. As Moyaert (2024) shows, this process of religionisation has a long history in Europe, and has often been intertwined with racialisation. In the current discourse of religious heritage, religion also often functions as a proxy for race. Given the social acceptability of defending secular Christian "Leitkultur", referring to religion has become a popular avenue for differentiating between those who are "genuinely" and "falsely" national (cf. Balibar 1991b, 100), thereby naturalising differences and dehumanising minorities.

The racialised paradigm of secular Christian Leitkultur often draws on liberal principles. In doing so, it oscillates between associating national culture with "universal" political principles on the one hand, and a particular Christian tradition on the other. Per Mouritsen (2006) refers to this as "particular universalism", where liberal values such as democracy, human rights and secularism are linked to national culture and heritage. The idea of Culture or Civilisation with a capital "C" plays a central role here: some cultures, primarily those identified as "national culture", are seen as "Civilized", and associated with Enlightenment "Culture", whereas others are seen as backward (Schinkel 2017, 117; 167). Here, Christianity as well as secularity are connected to a "national heritage" of, for example, gender equality, LGBTQ rights and secularism, while Muslims are portrayed as particularly "uncivic", as a group that cannot become included in the nation unless it adapts significantly, and even then will remain under suspicion (Amir-Moazami 2022; Duyvendak, Kešić, and Stacey 2022). Racialising replacement theory narratives reverberate

in such discourses when those with a certain background are assumed to be already familiar with "cultural" or "civic" elements of national cultures (see also Linders 2024). Citizens seen as "natives" as well as (white) immigrants from "Western" countries, including atheists, are assumed to be culturally Christian, and are therefore seen as embracing liberal democratic values.

In these examples, (nominally) liberal values are clearly deployed to support a racialised fictive ethnicity. However, the trope of protecting a majority national culture threatened by "new" attempts at pluralisation can also be found in seemingly benign references to religious heritage, where the racialised component is less (or less explicitly) present, and liberal criteria are more strictly adhered to. For example, in the debate about nativity scenes in France I briefly mentioned above, a prominent defence for keeping the crèche in city hall was that "Christmas is celebrated by all French people" (Beaman 2021, 105). The idea is that Christmas is "good fun that everyone can be part of" (Ferber 2012, 72), therefore abiding by the liberal criterion of inclusivity. At the same time, this discredits those who speak out against nativity scenes (or, in other contexts, Christmas trees) as overly sensitive and not "really" French. The statement that Christmas is celebrated by all French people implies an exclusionary narrative of belonging, signalling that those who do not celebrate Christmas are not truly French.

Similarly, when the Dutch government announced spending extra money on the preservation of monuments, with special attention for monumental churches, the Secretary of Culture explained her decision in the following way:

> In the field of heritage, churches play an enormous role when it comes to the recognisability of the landscape. If you know in these times where you are coming from, if you have that firmly under your feet, you can also cope with more transformation [vernieuwing] as a society (cited in Beekers 2021, 16).

As Daan Beekers explains, "The Secretary does not say what changes she is referring to, but in the light of the political debates preceding the instalment of her government many would interpret these words as pointing to increasing cultural diversity" (Beekers 2021, 16). The Secretary's explanation, then, implies that "transformation" in the form of increasing cultural diversity is something potentially threatening. The fact that bolstering one's "roots", apparently by preserving Christian churches, gives a firmer starting position to "cope with" diversity suggests that the appropriate response to diversity is in fact a further entrenchment and protection of dominant national heritage *against* other influences.

These engagements with religious heritage echo the portrayal of "new", "immigrant" groups as a threat to an already existing "historical heritage". In doing so, they reinforce a homogeneous and static understanding of national culture. This underplays the fact that cultures are dynamic, and

change is an intrinsic element to them (De Waal and Duyvendak 2022). It also directly supports the ethnicised narrative that "new" minority groups can be differentiated from a "native" population, which shares the "majority culture". This ignores the historical diversity within Europe, and associates minority cultures with immigration. In short, it reproduces the ontological assumptions of what Balibar calls "fictive ethnicity", and thereby enables the more explicitly racialised forms of nationalism described above.

The social and political repercussions of the ethnicisation of the nation are significant. It contributes to Islamophobia, antisemitism, colour-based racism, antizyganism and xenophobia. It provides the logic for the expansive security apparatus that polices those who are perceived as "false" nationals (Cesari 2010; De Koning 2020). It is also used in deciding who can cross the national border and who can be awarded citizenship (Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016). In other words, the understanding of national culture, including religious heritage, plays a central role in who can live in security, and whose lives are precarious. This is why it is important to problematise the ontological assumptions of a "fictive ethnicity", every time a homogeneous understanding of national culture, or a timeless "people", is projected into the past or the future. Although the racialisation of religion is not always present (or not always explicitly) in the current discourse on religious heritage, the same understanding of a single "people" and a homogenised past appears in discourses with and without an (explicit) racialised component. As Balibar (1991b, 48) emphasises, with the production of a fictive ethnicity, racism remains a "necessary tendency" in the constitution of nationalism. As I have shown above, it is facilitated by both liberal and illiberal understandings of the nation.[13] As long as the shared understanding of fictive ethnicity is present, these discourses reinforce each other.

Repercussions for liberal nationalist theory

In the analysis above, I have shown how political uses of religious heritage invoking liberalism contribute to exclusionary forms of nationhood by reproducing a fictive ethnicity. This critique does not automatically extend to the philosophical tradition of liberal nationalism, which is concerned with protecting against excessive forms of nationalism by providing guidelines for state policy. Nevertheless, the analysis of religious heritage and fictive ethnicity also has significant repercussions for liberal nationalist theory.

Liberal national theorists have traditionally insisted on two types of limits on the culture a liberal democratic state is legitimately permitted to support. First of all, the nation must be defined in cultural terms, rather than in terms of race or descent (Miller 2019, 33–34). National culture needs to be in principle accessible to citizens from different backgrounds, should they wish to participate in it. Second, national culture must be compatible with freedom

of conscience. As Will Kymlicka (2002, 267) emphasises, although "exposure to the common national culture provides a range of choices for people", it must not "impose any particular conception of the good life" nor limit "people's ability to question and revise particular values or beliefs". Therefore, only forms of religion that do not "constrain the conscience" of those who do not belong to this tradition (Maclure and Taylor 2011, 50) can be endorsed as part of national culture.

Under those conditions, liberal nationalists assume that national culture will be dynamic and that minority groups that are part of society for a longer duration of time, will start to see their own practices be incorporated into the national culture. As David Miller (2019, 34) emphasises, "[in liberal national culture] no cultural feature is set in stone. All are open to debate and critical challenge, and what were once minority views may turn over time into majority views". However, based on my analysis above, the two traditional liberal criteria clearly do not protect against an understanding of nationhood based on fictive ethnicity: a homogeneous understanding of religious heritage does not necessarily impose any conception of the good life onto citizens, nor is it considered inaccessible (recall the insistence that "everyone" should be able to enjoy Christmas and participate in it). And yet, such an understanding of heritage fosters the myth of a fictive ethnicity, at best shutting its doors to minority groups and at worst construing them as an existential threat. For these reasons, even if the liberal criteria are followed, it is highly unlikely that minority practices will ever become part of national culture.

In recent years, however, certain liberal nationalists have formulated more stringent demands for a just nationalism, in response to the surge in religious nationalist identitarianism. As Aurélia Bardon (2022) argues, most of these demands focus on prohibiting state endorsements of religion that send a message resulting in "expressive harm". For example, Cécile Laborde and Sune Lægaard (2019) propose that the liberal state must not endorse any symbolic religious establishment that aggravates the social vulnerability of minorities. This requires an interpretation of the "communicative meaning" of state policies. In cases where state endorsement of Christianity (or, for that matter, atheism or exclusionary secularity), reinforces the idea that certain minority groups are not part of the "imagined political community", this should not be allowed (see also Laborde 2017).[14] In a similar vein, Tamar De Waal (2020), focusing on the role of religion in national narratives of identity, argues that such narratives should not reinforce social hierarchies between citizens. She also adds, drawing on the work of Abizadeh (2004), that liberal democratic states should only be allowed to promote narratives that are "true" and "appropriate", meaning they have to be subjected to ongoing democratic deliberation.

These proposals provide a better protection than the "traditional" liberal criteria, because they require a contextual analysis that takes into account broader political discourses and power relations. In doing so, they focus our attention on how state policies often aggravate structural inequalities. These initiatives, however, seem to be primarily aimed at limiting the *excesses* of state-endorsed national culture. They do not target the ontological assumptions of unity through homogeneity underpinning current practices of nationhood. As I have shown above, a homogeneous understanding of nationhood plays a constitutive role in many contemporary injustices. Moreover, it is deeply rooted in contemporary social imaginaries, intertwined not only with government policy and legislation, but also with popular culture. Taking Balibar's problematisation of fictive ethnicity seriously requires taking a more pro-active stance not just to limit the excesses of national culture, but to actively unsettle the currently dominant ontology of nationhood as fictive ethnicity altogether. As Kris F. Sealey (2020) argues, this requires rethinking core notions in political thinking that are now often taken for granted: difference-as-allergy, community-as-static, and borders-as-closed.

Countering these ontological understandings cannot be achieved by limiting only explicitly exclusionary forms of nationalism. Nor can it be achieved by prescribing a religion- or culture-free, purely "civic" understanding of national culture, focused only on procedural and institutional practices.[15] As I have shown above, minority groups are often portrayed and treated as incompatible with secularism, democracy, gender equality or liberalism as "civic" values. A strict focus on incorporating only these elements in national culture and identity, then, is unlikely to counter the portrayal of minorities as potential threat. In other words, it is not the lack of "thinness" of national culture that is the problem, but the ontological premises of what we understand as "culture", "heritage" and "community" in the first place. Insofar as state policy can become useful for countering malign understandings of national culture, it will have to actively focus on countering the ontology of a "fictive ethnicity" at the heart of current nationhood.

This aim is not necessarily at odds with liberal theory. In fact, recent developments in liberal nationalism might provide useful starting points. For example, when De Waal (2020, 13) proposes that "all citizens should be invited to contribute to constant dialogues on how the national history should be depicted", this could be part of a broader state approach to dismantle the idea of one single understanding of national history.[16] Similarly, in Laborde's earlier work, she argues that the state has a responsibility to counteract pervasive social norms that perpetuate existing inequalities (Laborde 2008, 17–19), which could be extended to counteract the homogenising ontology of the nation and political community itself.

A normative framework for state policy that is explicitly aimed at unsettling the ontology of fictive ethnicity in nationhood would depart significantly from current state practices. It would entail understandings of identity, historical narrative, culture and community that foreground porousness, plurality and openness, rather than homogeneity and closedness. As Elisabeth Becker (2024) shows, such new formations of identity and community already exist and are put into practice "at the margins" of various European states. They have also been central to academic discussions outside liberal nationalism. For example, although a multiculturalist framework can run the risk of essentialising what is seen as "majority" and "minority" cultures, thinkers in the multicultural tradition have contested ontologies of homogeneous nationhood to various degrees, especially where they problematise structural racism and religious inequality (Jansen 2013; Modood 2019; Mookherjee 2018). Non-homogenising understandings of community and identity are even more prominent in theories of creolisation (Gordon 2014; Rodríguez and Tate 2015; Sealey 2020), and diaspora (Butler 2012; Gilroy 2003; Topolski 2020a). These different literatures provide important insights not only for policies on religious heritage, but for nationhood more broadly. Bringing them into the conversation on just state policies, could – given recent political developments – now be more important than ever.

Conclusion

In this article, I have analysed the current discourse on national religious heritage in Western Europe in light of Balibar's "fictive ethnicity". Both liberal and illiberal references to religious heritage construct and attach value to a "historic nation" to which only dominant groups can lay claim, portrayed as a prepolitical community with shared origins and interests (Balibar 1991b, 96). I have argued that this understanding of nationhood distorts cultural histories in the past and present, and underestimates both the violence and plurality present in religious-cultural landscapes. I also argued that it contributes to the continued marginalisation of minorities, who are construed as a potential threat to "historic nations". Here, the lens of fictive ethnicity shows how social hierarchies based on religion and race are often intertwined – in line with the complexity inherent in the concept of ethnicity, explained in the introduction to this special issue (Van der Tol and Becker 2024). As I have shown in this article, even references to religious heritage that are not (explicitly) racialised, legitimise and sustain structural inequalities, insofar as they perpetuate a homogeneous understanding of nationhood.

Although I have focused on national religious heritage, these findings also have repercussions for efforts to address structural inequalities arising from racism, religious discrimination, nativism and xenophobia more broadly. Insofar as proposals to make nations or nationalism more inclusive

perpetuate an ontology of fictive ethnicity, for example in uncritically assuming the existence of a unified "majority culture" or a single definitive understanding of "a nation's" past, such attempts will not be successful. Disrupting patterns of inequality in a more durable way requires interventions to counteract and unsettle the ontology of "fictive ethnicity". As I have suggested in the final section, this should be an important consideration for future normative research on state policies.

Notes

1. In their analysis of contemporary racism in the United States, France and the United Kingdom, Mondon and Winter (2020) show how "liberal" and "illiberal" discourses of racism reinforce each other. This article contributes to this literature by investigating how the increasingly popular discourse on national religious heritage not only parallels the interdependence of liberalism and illiberalism in contemporary racism, but also intersects with it.
2. Using the term "religious minority" warrants certain caveats. Religious individuals or communities can draw on various kinds of identification and religion is a "multidimensional activity", which can include "scripture, doctrine, worship, organisation, codes of living, community, art" and other aspects (Modood 2019, 5). Moreover, the identity of religious groups can also be attributed by societal or governmental discourses, and can intersect with racialisation (Topolski 2018).
3. My analysis is limited to the Western European context, particularly The Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, France, the United Kingdom and, albeit to a lesser extent, Spain and Denmark. The dynamics surrounding national culture will play out differently in Central or Eastern Europe, where we see other patterns of secularisation, nation-building and institutional arrangements between church and state.
4. Unlike earlier forms of community, the nation transcends earlier loyalties to lineage based on, for example, clan or neighbourhood community, by transposing kinship to a larger community connected to the state (Balibar 1991c, 100).
5. For an analysis of how philology played a central role in the constitution of racial taxonomies in the 19th century, see for example Olender (1992), Masuzawa (2005), Topolski (2018) and Moyaert (2024). This scholarship also shows the close intertwinement of comparative theology and religious categorisation with this process.
6. The template for the nation as a community of oneness was itself based on the Christian understanding of a *corpus christianum* (Van der Tol 2020, 74–75; see also Gorski 2000).
7. This understanding of multiple "religions" only comes into existence during this period (Topolski 2018, 62).
8. Non-Christian religions were also associated with darkness of skin (Meer 2013).
9. The idea that religious discrimination is not a serious problem, unlike racism, is itself a problematic product of secular hegemony (cf. Meer and Modood 2009).
10. The discourse of national religious heritage I outline here is dominant in Western Europe. However, it has also been met with resistance, both from religious and non-religious actors (Becker 2024; Beekers 2021; Cremer 2023).

11. Christian religious groups and national churches are attributed an important role in the protection of such heritage (Burchardt 2020, 169–170), although secular "national culture" at times also curtails practices by Christian faith groups and organisations (Beekers 2021). This holds even more strongly for historically marginalised forms of Christianity.
12. Spain is partially the exception, as Protestant, Jewish and Muslim minorities were legally recognised in 1992 as part of historical restorative justice. However, as Astor, Burchardt, and Griera (2017, 134) point out, this recognition is merely symbolic and "few measures were taken during subsequent years to ensure the legal and budgetary instruments necessary for successfully implementing the provisions included in the agreements". As a result, heritage discourses in Spain ultimately preserve Catholicism's hegemonic position (Astor, Burchardt, and Griera 2017, 140).
13. Note that racialisation can be found in both liberal and illiberal discourses.
14. See Bardon (2022) for an operationalisation of how this criterion can be applied in practice.
15. See Tinsley (2019) for a critique of a binary understanding between ethnic and civic nationalism.
16. Such an approach raises the question how a just and inclusive deliberative process can be achieved in this context. This warrants further research.

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